

Water scarcity continues

RAWALPINDI: From the point of view of the residents of Rawalpindi, the year 1998 ended on a bleak note with none of their civic problems having been resolved by the powerful rulers of the province despite much noise having been made by the right-hand man of the chief minister in Rawalpindi, Federal Minister for Labour and Overseas Pakistanis Sheikh Rashid Ahmed. The most important and crucial problem of the old city of Rawalpindi as well as of the Khakis city Rawalpindi Cantonment is the problem resulting from the uninterrupted supply of potable water. Thirty years ago, during Field Marshal Ayub Khan's much-trumpeted era water supply plan called Khanpur Water Supply Scheme was drawn up with much gusto. Though the plan was retrieved from its dusty burial ground in early 70s during the PPP's first government, the plan has making progress at snail's pace. Inevitably the funding problems emanating from the successive provincial government of the Punjab or from the Federal Government have been cropping up from time to time with the result that last year too, the Khanpur Water Supply Scheme did not come to fruition.

With the skyrocketing increase in the population of the twin-cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad, the water requirements of the two cities have pushed up many times over. Naturally there is increased pressure on the available water supply with the result that the gap between the supplies and consumption has increased many times over. Indeed if additional water resources are not tapped much earlier, the water riots in the two cities may follow suit and become habitual in the years to come. Planning for tapping the additional sources of drinking water is badly required. Even what is more essential in the present circumstances is the need for building up water reservoirs to cope with periods of acute scarcity.

There is a real need for collecting excess water from the floods emanating from the heavy rains over the hills. The flood waters usually go waste. A strategy must be chalked out to make use of the

flood water. For the foreseeable future of Rawalpindi and Islamabad, the water requirements of the city would be met from two Dams — Rawal Dam for Rawalpindi and Simly Dam — and for subsequent years from Khanpur Dam which would meet the future requirements of both Rawalpindi and Islamabad in the years to come. Even at present, ground resources in both Rawalpindi city and cantonment areas are helping in a big way to meet the water requirements of Rawalpindi by tapping 23 mgd water daily from the tubewells by the civic bodies.

A large number of household owners in Rawalpindi city and cantonment are privately tapping underground water resources by spending their own money on developing tubewells. Almost a large number of citizens in the new residential colonies in Rawalpindi make use of water drawn from the tubewells in their homes. In this way, the house holders become self-sufficient in the use of water and they do not depend on the resources of the civic bodies as far as water supplies are concerned. The latest on this important front is that the Khanpur Dam project may come to fruition by the middle of 1999 depending on its funding by the Punjab Government and the Federal Government.

Rawalpindi Development Authority (RDA) taking notice of the free use of water supplies by householder who do not pay anything by way of taxation to RDA's Water and Sewerage Authority for the use of water since the householders tapped water on their own. Seeing in it a source of generation of income, the WASA has decided to levy tax on tubewells installed in the houses in Rawalpindi City. The size-wise formula of the tax rate is as follows: Up to five Marlas — Rs18.88 a month; 6 to 7 Marlas — Rs50 a month; 8 to 10 Marlas — Rs100 a month; 11 to 19 Marlas — Rs125 a month; 1 Kanal (20 Marlas) — Rs200 a month; 1 to 2 Kanals — Rs275 a month; More than 2 Kanals — Rs400 a month.

The proposal of levying tax on the sinking of tubewells by RDA

in the private houses is without any lawful authority. True that the RDA and its offshoot Water and Sewerage Authority, have been dealing with bulk water supply. But on the face of it, only the Rawalpindi

Municipal Corporation is authorised to levy taxes on utilities and services. But levying taxes on domestic tubewells is a great injustice on those people who are entitled to basic amenities, and they do not get the amenities but are taxed when they manage to provide themselves the essential facilities at a heavy cost.

Installation of tubewell involves at least an expenditure of Rs18 to 20,000 in a private residence. Most often than not boring of the tubewells fails miserably. The spot chosen for boring is not always successful. Then the tubewell fails in midst of a year, resulting into relocation of the boring site. The WASA renders no service to the poor residents for sinking of the tubewell but even so it intends to realise charges without delivering anything in return. The proposed tax reminds one of the Chohla tax enforced during the Basic Democracies Era during Ayub regime. The tax on sinking of tubewells is reminiscent of the taxation on Chohlas (Hearth) — traditional fire-place for cooking food.

For the new year, there is no chance of Mass Transit System coming into operation in Rawalpindi much to the chagrin of the population of the sprawling city. While there has been much talk of bestowing on Lahore — the city of the ruling hierarchy of Pakistan — the Mass Transit System in the years to come to provide relief to the citizens harried by mass transport problem, there is no such proposal for at least the citizens of Rawalpindi. The rulers have not realised the importance for improving transport system for the denizens of Rawalpindi despite there being an urgent need for such a system. Mass Transit System for Rawalpindi should have been on the priority of the MNAs and MPAs from Rawalpindi district but it is definitely not on the priority list of the legislators.